



# From Total Meltdowns to Mild Non-Compliance: It's all a Challenge!

Have you ever been in a situation where no matter how many times you've told him to clean his room, he doesn't listen? You have to repeat yourself so many times you eventually get tired of hearing yourself talk. Or are you stuck in the house and have to wait until someone stays with your child so you can get some grocery shopping done? You know that a trip to the grocery store with him will mean a public embarrassment to you, as he grabs everything in sight and throws a tantrum if he doesn't get what he wants.

No matter how intense or mild the challenging behavior, it's a challenge to make it go away. However, with the help of a professional and the steps below, it's not an impossible task to accomplish.

## Step 1: Identify the Challenging Behavior

A challenging behavior is anything that someone does that significantly interferes with his or her daily routine. It is also an action that may pose harm to self or others. To identify the behavior pinpoint specifically what it is that makes a routine difficult. Do you stay home because going out in the community causes tantrums? Are you afraid of aggressive behavior when you end a fun activity? Once you identify the problem, it's time to find out why it's happening.

## Step 2: Understand Why a Challenging Behavior Occurs

The occurrence of challenging behavior is determined by the outcome of the behavior. If your behavior results in something good happening then you are more likely to act that way again. However, if your behavior results in something bad happening then you are less likely to repeat the behavior. Our children's behaviors work under the same principles. If there is something that they want and a challenging behavior has resulted in them getting that in the past then they are likely to act that way to get it. So challenging behavior is essentially their way of telling us that they need something.

Finding out what they need is the tricky part. Most challenging behavior occurs when children want attention, preferred items, sensory stimulation or if they are trying to avoid something they don't like such as work, yucky food or places where they dislike

being. Professionals determine the cause by seeing what positive outcomes followed the challenging behavior. Was the child removed from a loud environment? Did they get a treat? Did they get out of doing a chore? Were they given attention for what they did? Professionals then look for patterns. If the child is being "rewarded" each time the behavior occurs then the reason for the challenging behavior becomes known.

## Step 3: Fix the Challenging Behavior

Now that we know what the problem behavior is and why it's happening, how do you fix it? The following strategies are found in most Behavior Intervention Plans:

**Use Preventative Strategies** These strategies are used to prevent the problem behavior from occurring. Examples include: provide higher levels of attention, have communication devices available, include breaks (especially if the work is difficult), offer choices, arrange the environment to make it safe, make visual schedules and pictures available to be able to understand the environment.

**Teach Good Behavior** When we try to stop a bad behavior we need to teach a good behavior that serves the same purpose. Remember that the behavior is occurring because the child needs something. If you don't teach a new replacement behavior they will continue to do what works, even if it's not an acceptable behavior. For example, if the child screams to get attention, we should teach him to use a quiet voice and ask for attention.

**Provide Rewards for Good Behavior** Show your child that you like what she's doing by rewarding it. Whether it's social praise or a sweet treat or going out to the

store to buy a new toy, the rewards will help your child maintain the good behavior.

**Avoid Rewarding Bad Behavior** If we know why the challenging behavior is occurring then make sure that they do not access any positive outcomes. If your child is screaming as a way to get your attention, hold off on giving your attention until she can use a quiet voice. Once she uses a quiet voice, go overboard with your attention (tickles, social praise, hugs, etc.) to show her that she did a good job using good behavior.

**Be Consistent** Rules are rules. If you can't follow your rules consistently, how can you expect your child to. Lack of consistency means confusion, a no go for reducing challenging behaviors. Consistency with the rules between people and environments is also very important to show success in generalization.

**A very special thank you to our guest authors, Diana Wolf, MA, BCBA, and Nick Chappell, MS, BCBA, Verbal Beginnings**

*Disclaimer: Pathfinders for Autism does not endorse any products. This article is very broad and is for general understanding of Applied Behavior Analysis concepts that have been scientifically proven to reduce challenging behaviors. All behavior management treatment plans must be individualized to meet the specific needs of the child. Parents are encouraged to seek the consultation of a professional, such as a Board Certified Behavior Analyst for the most successful treatment outcome.*

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